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ABSTRACT

Teachers working with paraprofessionals should evaluate their effectiveness in promoting a comfortable and productive working climate for the paraprofessional A self-evaluation of their competence in defining responsibilities, creating a positive atmosphere, and providing training and recognition for the paraprofessional can be a helpful process. A sequence of seven steps is outlined for such an evaluation, beginning with teachers evaluating themselves on a list of target behaviors to describe their current pattern of behavior. The sequence also involves identifying one goal area in each of four subcategories for improvement and reevaluating the plan each quarter. (Author/CL)

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Working with Paraprofessionals: An Evaluation Guide for Teachers

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Running Head: Working with Paraprofessionals

Abstract

Teachers working with paraprofessionals should evaluate their effectiveness as facilitators of a comfortable and productive working climate. This requires a self-evaluation of their competence in defining responsibilities, creating a positive atmosphere, and providing training and recognition for the paraprofessional. The self-evaluation instrument described in this article will facilitate teachers in assessing each of these areas. Based on these findings, teachers can outline a facilitation plan to improve this working relationship. As a result of this process, paraprofessionals will be more likely to identify their role/contributions as essential to the classroom educational program.

Working with Paraprofessionals: An Evaluation Guide for Teachers

Introduction

It is essential that all teachers evaluate their current behavior in regard to the paraprofessional(s) working with them. The contributions of paraprofessionals to the special education classrooms can range from "hallowe" help to horrible headaches. Teachers tend to blame the paraprofessionals when they are ineffective saying, "They are more trouble than they are worth" (Fredericks, Baldwin, Hanson, & Fontana, 1971). As a result of varying degrees of training, teachers must expend time, effort, and energy in orienting paraprofessionals and in fostering a comfortable working relationship. Through the use of an effective self-evaluation model, teachers can develop an effective instructional team within the classroom. The expertise and training that result will improve the paraprofessionals' interactions and teaching of the students within that classroom.

Historically, turnover among paraprofessionals has been high (Shotwell, Dingman, & Tarjan, 1960; Taylor, 1964). They often receive only minimum wage, little credit for their effort and accomplishments within the classroom, and little control over their role in the classroom. These factors may lead to stress and ultimately burnout of the paraprofessionals (Frith & Mims, 1985).

Based on these reasons it is not difficult to understand why turnover is high. Teachers, however, have the ability to work through a self-evaluation type of goal setting procedure to improve both the "comfort" level and quality of the instructional team.

Purpose

To develop an effective instructional team the teacher must assume a number of responsibilities for preparing the paraprofessional. These include the following duties and responsibilities:

1. Providing in-service training in teaching methods and materials based on the needs of the students within the classroom,
2. Reorganizing the schedules and responsibilities within the classroom to reflect the skills of the paraprofessional,
3. Providing feedback and reinforcement to the paraprofessional, and,
4. Creating a comfortable and effective atmosphere for staff and students.

These are responsibilities for which few teachers receive training in teacher pre-service programs. The following procedure and

instruments will help the teacher to achieve the goal of creating an effective instructional team.

Method

The evaluation of the teacher/paraprofessional working climate may be completed independently by the teacher or together with the paraprofessional. Allowing the paraprofessional to participate in the process may stimulate a productive channel of communication which could also improve the working climate. Some special education teachers, however, may find it difficult to initiate a combined teacher evaluation procedure. In these instances the teacher may evaluate herself and carry out her own goal setting procedures.

The following steps will provide a recommended sequence of activities to be followed when the teacher and paraprofessional are jointly involved in the evaluation process.

1. Initially, the teacher evaluates himself/herself on the list of target behaviors in each subcategory of the Teacher/Paraprofessional Working Climate Evaluation Tool to describe his/her current pattern of behavior. (See Figure 1.)

Insert Figure 1 about here

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2. The paraprofessional will then be asked to complete the assessment tool to describe his/her perception of the teacher in each of these areas.

3. The teacher and paraprofessional discuss their ratings identifying areas where a need for attention is indicated. Together they identify no more than one goal area in each of the four subcategories where improvement is needed. These goals become part of the quarterly facilitation plan. (See Figure 2.) They are entered under the "goals" heading on the facilitation plan.

Insert Figure 2 about here

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4. The teacher and paraprofessional specify the activities which will be employed to achieve the goals under the "activities" section. The activities may require paraprofessional initiative in addition to teacher initiative. These should be so labeled by putting a "T" and/or "P" following the activity.

5. The teacher and paraprofessional set up a time line to operationalize the activities and these dates are included under "time line" on the facilitation plan.

6. Quarterly, the teacher and paraprofessional re-evaluate the teacher using the same working climate evaluation form. They

also assess their completion of the activities indicated on the facilitation plan.

7. Based on these findings a new plan is written for the next quarter.

Summary

Joint participation of the teacher and paraprofessional in this process is optimal. The same steps, however, may be followed independently by the teacher without the explicit knowledge of the paraprofessional. It is time for teachers to stop blaming paraprofessional for their lack of expertise and start designing activities to enhance their effectiveness. Administrators should encourage this process by providing additional joint planning times for the teacher and paraprofessional. Administrative leadership in this self-evaluation process in encouraged.

Services to the handicapped will improve as teachers evaluate their delivery of training, recognition, responsibility and atmosphere to the paraprofessionals in their classrooms. Implementing an effective plan of action based on the findings of the evaluation process will result in creation of a positive classroom climate. In turn, the students will benefit from the improved skills of the paraprofessional. Through an effective evaluation system coupled with an appropriate plan of action, the

contributions of paraprofessional will continue to grow in importance in the education of handicapped children.

References

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Shotwell, A. M., Dingman, F. & Tarjan, G. (1960). Need for improved criteria in evaluating job performance of state hospital employees. American Journal on Mental Deficiency, 65, 208-213.

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Figure Caption

Figure 1. Teacher/Paraprofessional working climate evaluation tool.

Directions: Read the following phrases under each category. Respond to them by circling one of the numbers 1 through 5. If this activity is definitely not true in the teacher/paraprofessional working environment, you would circle number 1. If the statement is extremely true, you would circle number 5.

1 DEFINITELY NOT TRUE	2	3 MODERATE	4	5 EXTREMELY TRUE

RESPONSIBILITY:

1. Allows paraprofessional input in setting expectations 1 2 3 4 5
2. Allows opportunity to decision making 1 2 3 4 5
3. Invites personal ideas from paraprofessional 1 2 3 4 5
4. Varies responsibilities of the paraprofessional 1 2 3 4 5
5. Encourages personal initiative 1 2 3 4 5

TRAINING:

1. Clarifies student goals and objectives 1 2 3 4 5
2. Provides training in behavior management techniques 1 2 3 4 5
3. Provides training in record keeping 1 2 3 4 5
4. Provides training in specialized teaching techniques 1 2 3 4 5
5. Provides training in use of specialized materials 1 2 3 4 5

RECOGNITION:

1. Provides daily feedback 1 2 3 4 5
2. Acknowledges accomplishments 1 2 3 4 5
3. Completes honest and accurate formal evaluations 1 2 3 4 5
4. Shares credit for student accomplishments 1 2 3 4 5
5. Informs administrators of positive contributions of paraprofessional 1 2 3 4 5

ATMOSPHERE:

1. Maintains congenial atmosphere 1 2 3 4 5
2. Listens attentively to concerns of paraprofessional 1 2 3 4 5
3. Treats paraprofessional as an asset to educational program 1 2 3 4 5
4. Encourages positive student/paraprofessional relationships 1 2 3 4 5
5. Assumes some responsibility for paraprofessional's lack of expertise 1 2 3 4 5

Figure Caption

Figure 2. Teacher/paraprofession working climate facilitation plan.

FACILITATION PLAN				
General Areas	Goals	Activities	Time Line	Evaluation ✓ If Complete
Responsibility				
Training				
Recognition				
Atmosphere				